10 Sharing the Year Abroad experience with non-language students: a student-led project on outward mobility

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Abstract

Whilst internationalisation has already become an integral part of the curriculum at all higher education institutions in the UK, what does it actually mean? Is student mobility an aim in itself or is it more useful as a promotional tool to develop more internationally oriented graduates? How can we help students take control over their intercultural learning? This article analyses a recent student-led project undertaken by final-year Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) students at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) to promote outward mobility among students on non-language degree programmes against the backdrop of current discussions surrounding internationalisation. It examines advantages, constraints, and drawbacks of such a project and presents some ideas for future consideration. The project has been developed and managed by the author of this article (module and project leader and Faculty International Mobility coordinator) in collaboration with the Head of International Partnerships at SHU.

Keywords: internationalisation, student experience, mobility, global engagement.

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1. Introduction

Discussions surrounding internationalisation of higher education, and most specifically its curricula, have been the subject of extensive research for over a decade now (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2009; Leask, 2009, 2015; Maringe & Foskett, 2012; Streitwieser, 2014; Williams & Lee, 2015). This article focusses on a practitioner's perspective and therefore does not include a more complex literature review; instead, it presents some ideas on embedding internationalisation in the curriculum and analyses the practicality of these in an institutional context. For the benefit of other practitioners, it outlines in detail the project (context and project description) and discusses its positive outcomes and drawbacks (evaluation), drawing attention to some discrepancies between the theory and practice, and making recommendations for consideration of senior management, MFL lecturers, tutors, and global mobility coordinators (recommendations and conclusion).

2. Context

Sheffield Business School at SHU is home to applied undergraduate dual language degree programmes with International Business, Marketing, or Tourism. Like in other UK institutions, language students spend a compulsory period abroad, but, unlike other universities, SHU students are required to spend 18 months abroad, studying and working in France, Germany, Italy, or Spain. After their return, most of the students will take a final-year consultancy module called Languages and Cultures in the Global Workplace (LCGW), which allows them to apply the linguistic and intercultural skills gained during their placements to a specific, real-life project for selected local or international companies and organisations. Traditionally, at least one project per year would be commissioned by SHU; in the past, this would involve projects aimed at improving the international student experience as well as collaborating with the language society on a series of integration events for home and exchange students. All projects are supported by Venture Matrix, an employability team

that liaises between the university and external stakeholders, and provides professional advice to both employers and students.

3. Project description

In 2017/2018, the international SHU project was commissioned by the Head of International Partnerships for the Faculty of Business (Sheffield Business School) and was specifically designed to address first-year home students in an attempt to increase the outgoing student numbers in the faculty and promote outward mobility among students on non-language degree programmes. Also in 2017/2018, Venture Matrix entered a three-year long partnership with Santander Universities: every year, Santander will financially support a module which enables students to use their skills to collaborate with organisations abroad and further develop their employability skills. The first module to receive the financial help was the LCGW module. It was decided that the final-year students would plan and organise an 'Erasmus Taster Trip' to two European partner universities and invite along a group of first-year students with the aim of encouraging them to take part in the outward mobility the year after.

Eight final-year students on Languages with International Business, Marketing, and Tourism programmes were assigned to this project: they worked in two groups of four, developing marketing strategies and promoting study abroad opportunities in the faculty while also conducting market research and monitoring social media ('students-to-students') connected to mobility. Both groups delivered two complex group reports analysing perceived barriers to outward mobility as well as proposing feasible solutions to tackle the issue based on extensive market research. They also developed promotion strategies to increase the outgoing student numbers, e.g. among others, targeting prospective students at open days with talks and specially designed materials. The most attractive part of the projects were, however, the Erasmus trips: students organised them with the help of the partner institutions abroad – University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki. They advertised the opportunity in the faculty and shortlisted ten first-year students

after having read their expressions of interest. The main criteria for the selection, suggested by the Head of International Partnerships, was the applicants' international experience (or, rather, the lack thereof), their expectations from the trips (take away the fear of the unknown), and intellectual curiosity towards the other. At the end, the students conducted formal interviews and invited eight first-year students to join them on the trips.

Both partner universities welcomed the groups in January 2018 by organising extensive campus tours. In Helsinki, the group was also invited to take part in admissions interviews for international students: an opportunity that was extremely well received. Both groups also organised tailor-made workshops about intercultural communication and the Erasmus experience. After their return, the first-year students were asked to fill in feedback questionnaires indicating their level of satisfaction and measuring their (basic) intercultural awareness. The results and evaluation were very positive, however, only four out of eight students decided to apply for the mobility. One student admitted having social anxiety and not feeling comfortable spending a semester in a foreign environment, one decided to withdraw from the university for unrelated reasons, and two did not give any reason at all (see the next section for more detailed information).

The assessment in the module is 100% a portfolio: the students submitted a 3,000-word group report (one per group), two individual reflections, one on team and personal performance and another academic one on cultural awareness and its applicability in the project, as well as a number of individual research tasks, which all fed into the group report. The research findings were extremely valuable from the faculty's perspective, and some of the recommendations have already been implemented; the social media accounts are now also being populated with data by the student international officers in the language society.

If a similar project should be run in the future again, resources permitting, some amendments would have to be proposed to increase its effectiveness: an early information about the available funding, more focus on the first-year

students' impressions (evaluation beyond standard questionnaires, potentially reflections or audio-visual presentations), and a long-reaching follow-up to allow the students to record their after-mobility reflections and evaluation of their experiences with a potential continuation beyond their graduation.

4. Evaluation of the project (trips)

The student project, although it included a well-designed and useful international experience and focussed on building awareness of study abroad opportunities, has not fulfilled its objectives entirely. It was an attempt to internationalise the faculty, but because of the short time frame and lack of suitable resources needed for a more thorough preparation, not all of the elements of the project were successful. In the following, I shall use the broad definition of the curriculum as it is used by Betty Leask (2015) in her *Internationalizing of the Curriculum*, where the term curriculum "includes all aspects of the learning/teaching situation" (Leask, 2015, p. 7, following Kemmis & Fitzclarence's 1991 definition) rather than just the list of topics of study. The curriculum is hence a blend of three interactive elements that all contribute to the student learning experience: the formal, the informal, and the hidden curriculum (certain decisions to include or exclude some content from the formal and informal curriculum).

While the project itself was part of the formal curriculum (students *must* work on a consultancy project in their final year), students were given certain freedom in designing the actual activities and engaging first-year students in a series of extra-curricular events. However, as previously explained, the project or, more precisely, the Erasmus Taster Trips, did not bring the expected outcomes: only 50% of the first-year students decided to go abroad as a result of this experience. While the reasons behind their decision might be prosaic, the question remains whether the project was developed with the right set of objectives and the right focus. Had the activities been prepared with a different angle or using more resources on campus before and after the visits abroad rather than on the actual trips, would more first-year students have decided on applying for an exchange afterwards?

The answer requires looking at the trips – or, by extension, outward mobility – as a means to create a shift in the mentality of the students, rather than an end product: increasing the number of students going abroad. This concept is not new in the discourse surrounding internationalisation of higher education (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; Brewer & Leask, 2012; De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2009; Leask, 2015). Leask (2009) distinguishes between the process of internationalisation of the curriculum and the end product of the process, which is an internationalised curriculum. In creating the right conditions and developing an understanding of what internationalisation means, we devised an internationalised curriculum which "will engage students with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity and purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens" (Leask, 2009, p. 209).

When analysing the results of the project, it becomes clear that the 'purposeful development' of both the first- and final-year students' intercultural perspectives did not receive enough attention in the preparation phase for the trips. There are several factors which played a significant role here: the module is a final-year module taken by students who just returned from their work placements abroad, hence had a one year break from studying and taking relevant modules; all projects were developed and approved shortly before the new academic year (as is common) and the allocation of projects was done randomly for the purpose of fairness and, finally, the information about the available funding came late, and therefore, the taster trips were added to the projects as an ad-hoc component, which was not planned in the initial phase. Therefore, the expectation that all first-year students would apply for the study exchange after their return from the taster trips and that all final-year language students will have experienced a boost in confidence as a result of the intercultural mentoring they have been asked to do, was simply unrealistic.

The 'purposeful development' rooted in the internationalised curriculum did not take place due to the factors mentioned above, but also due to the fact that international mobility is too often synonymous with intercultural competence (De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2009; Leask, 2015) – a common misconception

that has influenced some of the project's learning outcomes. Instead of concentrating on the development of the right conditions and building on a deep understanding of processes of internationalisation, the project was focussed on one aim: to convince the non-specialist students to go abroad, without explaining in more detail why they should do it and why this was crucial for their own future.

It is also an acceptable conclusion that the final-year language students were equally unprepared from this perspective, although their own account of the trips and the feedback they received from the first-year students were overwhelmingly positive. They had the advantage of having gone through the experience of living abroad – most of them spent their study abroad semester in one country and worked in another for a full year – but after the return, they were not offered the possibility of a more meaningful reflective evaluation of their intercultural experience beyond the standard placement report with reflective elements, which was briefly discussed with their coordinators and tutors.

Therefore, the students, equipped with what they perceived as a wealth of international experience, became uncomfortably self-aware of the gaps created by the exclusivity of the knowledge of the 'specific country only' (i.e. France, Germany, Italy, Spain). In other words, the experience they relied upon exposed that they were not fully prepared to claim the 'global citizenship' they have been truly confident about, as they struggled (even if less so) with the same issues in Finland and the Netherlands as their younger peers – foreign language, food, and customs. This became particularly apparent in the oral evaluation of the trips that took place just after their return.

This task can also be seen as an example of a 'hidden message' of the (informal) curriculum: by requesting that the first-year students take part in a workshop and discuss the learning outcomes with them, but without making the effort to request to participate beforehand in a similar training themselves, the final-year students made assumptions about their own suitability as intercultural trainers and underestimated their own intercultural competence.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

The final-year language degree programme students were given a difficult task to handle: they had to convince a group of students without any linguistic background or intercultural awareness to apply for a study semester abroad. Given the already mentioned institutional constraints, there is no doubt that they acted professionally and responsibly and managed to create an inclusive environment for the first-year students, who indicated at the beginning of the project that they did not think about studying abroad in the future. Still, 50% of them will be studying abroad as a result of this experience.

How can projects like this one be better embedded in the curriculum, then? A change in mentality and attitudes at many levels is a *sine qua non* of a successful process of internationalisation of the curriculum. It requires attention and increased resources from various stakeholders: faculty deans, heads of departments, members of staff, administrative support, etc. (cf. Brewer & Leask, 2012), but it also requires a better understanding of what an internationalised curriculum means for the students. This gap between the theory, the expectations of the senior management, and the actual reality of the classroom means that the process of internationalisation is more of a challenge than perhaps expected.

The project on promoting outward mobility, although a truly important experience for the language degree programme students, is not enough to introduce the changes that would impact on the curriculum as such, and enthuse the development of 'global skills' in *all* students. It is important, however, because it demonstrates the capability of language students to reflect and share the reflection with non-language students for whom this experience might be truly transformational. Naturally, any complex changes in the curriculum can only be agreed formally as part of the institutional strategy, but I shall point out a few possible areas (adapted from Leask, 2015) where MFL lecturers and tutors could offer specific guidance based on their own expertise in area studies and intercultural communication.

First of all, we should encourage a positive transformation of the institutional internationalisation strategy to shift the focus in the curriculum from looking

at the specific activity, which only addresses a small number of students, to concentrating on the content of the whole module/course, its learning outcomes, and assessment. This goes beyond the assessment criteria of a given module: in the internationalised curriculum, the students should also be regularly and consistently assessed on their progress in developing intercultural competence using a variety of specially designed assessment tools online (cf. Fantini, 2009). Secondly, the language classes – traditionally relatively small in numbers and hence offering the perfect setting for a personalised approach and time for intercultural preparation – could be the ideal place for learning to become truly transformative, i.e. causing a shift in mentality (cf. Brewer & Cunningham, 2009, using Mezirow's 1997 research), which can only happen when the students are ready to face new experiences and able to deal with the cognitive and emotional dissonance they will most likely be exposed to during a year abroad (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009). Finally, we should encourage our language students to act as ambassadors to promote the benefits of outward mobility and share their experience in formal and informal settings: through special events, organised societies, formal seminars in intercultural competence (both before and after the mobility), but also, like in the discussed project, as part of their ambassadors' role during open days – reaching out to prospective students early on, thus preparing a foundation for their possible future interest in international study or work placement opportunities. Only by designing an internationalisation strategy truly and consistently rooted in the curriculum can we help our students become global graduates.

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